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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4372
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE
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RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 3541
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 3744
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UNCLAS BEIRUT 000264

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA
ALSO FOR IO/PDAS WARLICK
P FOR DRUSSELL AND RRANGASWAMY
USUN FOR WOLFF/GERMAIN/SCHEDLBAUER
NSC FOR MCDERMOTT, SHAPIRO

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: ELECTIONS SNAPSHOT: BAABDA

SUMMARY

11. (SBU) This is the eleventh in a series of snapshots we will produce for key electoral districts ("qada") in the run-up to the June 7, 2009 parliamentary elections.

12. (SBU) Baabda, the home of the Presidential Palace, is one of the most confessionally diverse districts in Lebanon. Christians hold a slight majority, although Shia and Druze make up significant minorities. Analysts consider Baabda one of the most critical districts for the March 14 coalition to retain its current majority. In the 2005 elections, March 14 supporters and opposition Shia parties, Amal and Hizballah, allied to deny Christian leader Michel Aoun's list of candidates from winning. In 2009, however, Aoun's party is allied with Hizballah and Amal, a fact that favors them. The role of independent candidates and potential electoral violence between Shia and Christian voters will also be issues to watch in Baabda. End summary.

BAABDA: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

13. (U) Historically, Baabda city was the capital of the autonomous Ottoman Mount Lebanon and remains the capital of the Mount Lebanon administrative province ("mohafaza"). Currently, Baabda district, home to the Baabda Presidential Palace and several military installations, including the Ministry of Defense headquarters in Yarze, is one of the most confessionally diverse districts in Lebanon. Christians hold a slight majority (55 percent), while Shia represent 23 percent and Druze, 17 percent. In the previous election, Baabda was combined with Aley in one electoral district. After the May 2008 Doha Agreement, Baabda and Aley became separate electoral districts.

14. (U) There are six parliamentary seats in the qada: three Maronite seats, two Shia seats, and one Druze seat. Currently, three MPs are allied with the majority March 14 coalition. An MP allied with Hizballah holds one Shia seat, while a true independent Pierre Daccache holds another. The sixth seat has remained vacant since the 2007 assassination of March 14 MP Antoine Ghanem because no by-election was held.

FACTORS AT PLAY IN
PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

¶5. (SBU) Most analysts agree that competition in Baabda, especially for the Maronite seats, will be critical to determine which side wins the overall majority in parliament. In the 2005 elections, an unlikely alliance between March 14 partners and the opposition Shia parties, Amal and Hizballah, narrowly defeated Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) candidates, despite FPM winning almost two-thirds of the total Christian votes in Baabda. However, the alliances have radically changed since then. The current opposition alliance of Hizballah, Amal, and FPM will make it difficult for March 14 to retain its seats if its candidates are not well regarded by the electorate.

¶6. (SBU) Another important factor in Baabda is the candidacies of independent candidates. Several independents who are allied with March 14 have declared their intention to contest the elections. These include Edmond Gharios, son-in-law of Metn political powerbroker Michel Murr. It is expected that all of the current MPs will also contest their seats.

¶7. (SBU) Some analysts predict also that tensions between Shia and Christian voters in the district could lead to violence. The Chiyah area which separates the Hizballah stronghold of the Dahiyeh (Beirut's southern suburbs) from Christian neighborhoods in Ain el Roummaneh is of particular concern.

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